

Symbols That
Stand for
Themselves

ROY WAGNER

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO AND LONDON

Contents

	Preface	ix
1	Introduction	1
2	Too Definite for Words	14
3	Metaphor Spread Out: The Holography of Meaning	34
4	Death on the Skin: Mortality and Figure-Ground Reversal	58
5	Epoch: Real and Unreal Time	81
6	The Western Core Symbol	96
7	Conclusion: Third-order Trope and the Human Condition	126
	References	143
	Index	147

2 Too Definite for Words

There are two ways in which names, as symbols, can be considered. We can consider them as "codings," or points of reference, merely representing the things named, or we can consider them in terms of the relation between the symbol and the thing symbolized. In the first instance naming becomes matter of contrasts and grouping among the names themselves: a microcosm of symbols is deployed to code or represent the world of reference. The world of phenomena is self-evident and apart. In the second instance naming becomes a matter of analogy: symbol and symbolized belong to a single relation, a construction within a larger world, or macrocosm.

The distinction here is not a trivial one, because all words, and all symbols, insofar as they are points of reference, can be considered "namings." It is clear that both modes of viewing symbols, as coding and as analogy, have a certain potential, and that the construction of an explanatory microcosm called "structure" realizes only part of the potential. The other part involves a mode of construction that includes symbol and symbolized within the same expression, and implies, among other things, that the symbolized is no less a part of culture than the symbol.

To give an example, among the Daribi people of Papua New Guinea, the verb form *poai* (a participle of the verb *poi*, "to be named," "to be congruent with") is used to indicate the relation of a person or thing to the element for which it has been named.¹ The two, denominator and denominatum, are said to be *sabi* (i.e., "tail"), or "namesakes," of one another, elements, that is, that have a (socially) recognized "as if" relationship

1. Roy Wagner, *Habu: The Innovation of Meaning in Daribi Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), pp. 85-94.

with each other. The actual, verbal "name" is treated as a function of this relationship; thus, if a person is named for something with a plurality of conventional designations (a sulphur-crested cockatoo, for instance), all of these designations are considered equally to be names of the person (e.g., *nara*, *terawai*).

Such a relationship is individual, and individuating, in relation to convention, because it cancels or suspends the order of conventional reference in which men, for instance, and cockatoos are assumed to be distinct and nonoverlapping entities. The "as if" of the name, so to speak, sets itself in opposition to the "as if" of referential designation; the name defines for itself a possibility, excluded by convention, in which a man might be considered, for whatever reason, to be similar to, and thus "be," a cockatoo. That possibility coincides rather uniquely with the name, and so we may conclude that the name "stands for" the possibility that it elicits (and hence signifies its own relationship, or itself),² and also that it self-references itself through that possibility. To call a man "Sulphur-crested Cockatoo" is to give the man an individuality insofar as a metaphor of his being a cockatoo is allowed. But the "as if" of this possibility must necessarily impinge upon the "as if" of the collective referential, or "coding," systems, primarily because they both use the same set of conventions. Thus the symbols are used again and again, entering into varying combinations, and it is the self-referencing possibilities of the constructs that change and differentiate themselves, creating the collective as an innovation upon the individual, and vice versa.

If we treat names as merely names, points of reference, then symbolism becomes a matter of reference: a microcosm of names is counterposed to a macrocosm of referents. But if we treat "name" as relationship, the microcosm of names is no longer a microcosm; it becomes immersed in a macrocosm of analogic construction. Not only do we have an analogy that encompasses name and named, but that analogy suggests, and

2. This position recalls the "possible worlds" argument that Kripke uses against the Frege-Russell notion of the descriptive nature of naming. See Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), 48-60.

tends to enter us into, analogic relations among macrocosmic constructs.

The participle *poai* indicates *any* resemblance that can be found between some person or thing (or state, act, or whatever) and another. People who share one point of resemblance (and a name itself is a point of resemblance, however it may have been acquired) share all of their resemblances, for *poai* names them "the same." On this basis, all people have an infinite range of "names," all are in some sense "named" all things, and all of these names and people are one. (The one name, incidentally, is *poai*, "named," which an otherwise nonplussed Daribi parent can bestow in recognition of the child's just having been named—"poai"; the alternative is to name it, using the negative infix, for its recent unnamed state—*poziawai*, "unnamed." Both names are common.) The problem is more one of stopping, or conventionalizing, the flow of analogies—the "pull" from one analogy to all others—than of finding analogies. The name (or names) that is *socially* recognized serves to mediate among personal resemblances so as to control the analogic flow for social purposes. If a name is a social point of reference, an individualizing relationship, then it is so because it artificially *stops* the flow at the point of that relationship. Thus the microcosm of social names *mediates* the macrocosm of analogy by cutting it into manageable pieces. And the macrocosm of analogy, of course, mediates the microcosmic points of reference by allowing us to "see" resemblances among them, bridging them into *sabi* relationships among people, or people and animals (fig. 1). Daribi say that *sabi* should help one another.

If names are symbols, and symbols names, it should be no trouble to make this special case of naming a general case of symbolism. All we need to do is expand the sense of "name" into an instance of microcosmic restriction, and the sense of *poai*, analogy, into the range of all perceptual phenomena that form, or that may form, the basis for human experience and communication. We can then confront, on a more cosmic basis, the issue of symbolism, and we can also deal with the mediation that serves to negotiate human cultural conception and action within it. (And if we reflect on the fact that mediation actually creates the analogies and codings, by the simple fact of nego-

tiating them, it emerges that "negotiating" human cultural conception and action is the same as creating, or inventing, it.)

Perception has characteristically been treated as a kind of natural function in studies of meaning, a phenomenal realm serving as a frontier area of meaning, from which symbolism takes its expressive media, and upon which it imposes (as in

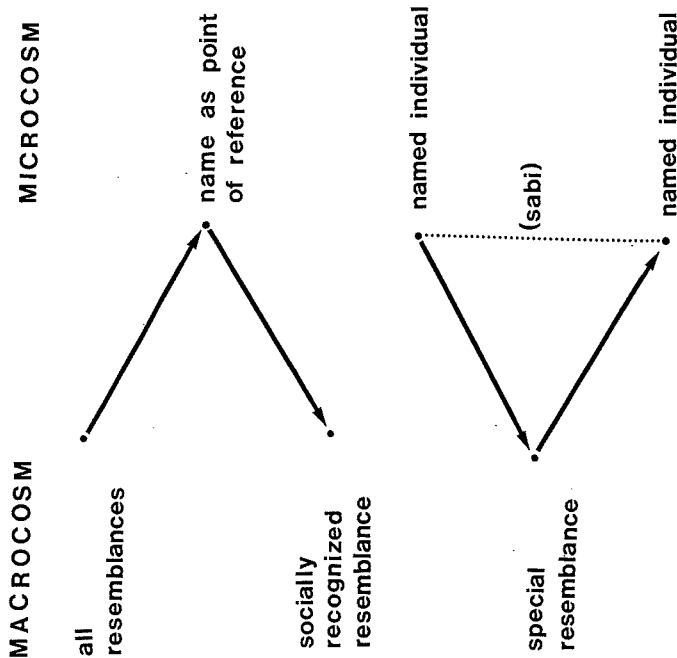


FIGURE 1: Mediation in Daribi naming practice.

"apperception") an order and an orientation. The Saussurian notion of the "sign" as a sensual mediator between concept and percept (as well as other similar ideas, such as that of the phoneme, or the musical tone) is itself a "sign" of this assumptional framework, which centers the crucial areas of meaning upon symbolic points of reference, their grammars, syntaxes, and so forth. Recent studies in neurophysiology sug-

gest, however, that perception is more than a frontier of symbolism with the natural world—that it is, in fact, centrally involved.

Bela Julesz, of Bell Telephone Laboratories, speaks of “cyclopean perception”—that which results in the “formation of a percept at some central location in the visual system by using stimuli that could not possibly produce that percept at an earlier location.”³ The most familiar example of such “global” information, as Julesz would have it, is that of stereoscopic vision, which is based on “peripheral” information from the two optical retinas, but which would require a special, internal “retina” for the formation of the image. He cites experimental evidence to indicate that meaning in visual art, music, poetry, and linguistic expression generally is “cyclopean” in this sense,⁴ and notes that

the cyclopean mind is a giant since the great majority of all the neural input of our nervous system enters into it. It is also a simpleton, incapable of the symbolic manipulations so essential in languages, logic, and mathematics; and it lacks the ability of abstraction.⁵

Meaning, it seems, is itself a perception, and its experiencing and expression are oblique to the ordering of grammars and points of reference, which are, at best, its elicitors. More than this, meaning is a perception *within* what we could call the “value space” set up by symbolic points of reference, a “stereoscopic” view, if you will, of different symbolic points of reference brought to focus at a single cyclopean “retina.” It is thus the perception of analogy, and its expansion into larger forms, or frames, of culture takes the form of a “flow” of analogy.

The identification of the sign as a mediator between percept and symbolic concept establishes *abstraction*—the birth of order

3. Bela Julesz, *Foundations of Cyclopean Perception*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 3.

4. *Ibid.*, 53.

5. *Ibid.*, 14.

as accomplished fact—as the single constitutive act in the emergence of meaning. Forever after speculation has been aroused as to the origin of language, the invention of abstraction that formed the Word in the Beginning. But the realization that mean *is* perception, occurring within the “natural” ground from which abstraction supposedly freed the word, indicates that “abstraction” is, rather, part of a generative and ongoing process. The invention of a microcosm by abstraction from a perceptual macrocosm is half of a highly charged dialectical interaction, establishing a sensory continuum within which the ordering and refiguring of meaning is accomplished. The other half of this charged interaction is an equally significant expansion, or concretization, of microcosm into macrocosm that occurs in the formation of analogy. The invention of microcosm, of symbol and language, and of macrocosm, meaning and meaningful world, are intrinsically and dialectically related aspects of the same process.

The coding of microcosms, sensorily and qualitatively restricted media for the representation of symbolic reference, seems to be universal in human cultures. Spoken language is the most obvious, and perhaps the most important, instance, though nonverbal “body languages” and inscribed, visual codings also furnish examples. Such codes are invariably generated through a limitation and restriction of sensory range, a diminished background against which minute variations, such as minor sound inflections or the shapes of letters or numbers, can be used to represent significant points of variation. Restriction of this sort determines a kind of redundancy, often remarked upon by theorists of language, in which what are recognizably the same sounds or images keep recurring in the course of expression. The recurrence actually makes use of the coding medium, the sensual component of symbolization, to convey a sense (in large part illusory) of referential invariance; a given sound or orthographic symbol marks the “point” for a point of reference. As the point holds its place, so does the reference.

In considering the realization of the microcosm, I should like to draw upon the particularly felicitous example provided by Professor Nancy D. Munn, in her studies of iconographic

representation among the Walbiri people of central Australia.⁶ Like the graphic representations of other central desert peoples, notably, for instance, the Arunta, Walbiri iconographs stand in a profound relation to the cosmological and ritual realizations of the traditional life.

While they most certainly describe a microcosm, the ambiguities inherent in their representative mode disqualify them from consideration as "written language" in the conventional sense of discursive phonography or ideography.

It could well be argued, on the other hand, that for all their divergence from the mimesis of speech characteristic of a phonographic script such as our own, such iconographs do approximate the ideography of traditional Chinese and Japanese writing. There are, of course, far fewer "characters" than we find in the Oriental orthographies, but here again the possibility arises that the ambiguities of the Australian codes are not necessarily more formidable, but merely differently situated. For they are stylized and abstracted pictures, not of sounds or ideas, but of the impressions that are (or would be) made in the earth by beings that move across it, or of static forms situated upon the earth. Many of the most commonly used forms are in fact close imitations of the tracks of human beings or animals.

A juxtaposition of the graphs is always readable as a sort of abstract diagram or map, provided that the context is clearly understood (a more literally inclined tradition would doubtless devise "sense signs," like those furnished in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, for this purpose). The iconographs are inscribed in areas of loose sand in accompaniment to ordinary conversation as well as to illustrate a women's narrative that Munn calls the "sand story."⁷ In these cases their continuity seems to be a more or less ideographic one, following the episodes of the narration or conversation. The cosmologically significant depictions made and used by men, however, generally base their continuity on that of the track, or route, of a person or

6. Nancy D. Munn, *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

7. *Ibid.*, 59.

being moving across the country. A track can be *followed* (*burad*⁸) in its creation or interpretation, and movement "along" the spatial progression that is graphically depicted or implicit in the "line" of songs sung about successive points or episodes in the journey has the effect of modeling the continuity of spoken discourse upon a spatial traverse.

The country of these people is, of course, known and experienced through the known trails and landmarks that such continuities represent. Indeed, since the traditional Walbiri must perforce, as hunters and gatherers, not only gain their living by following tracks (in hunting), but also spend their lives constantly *making* tracks themselves, that life in all of its acts became a process of *inscription*. And this inscription, in large part an endless repetition of domestic and productive acts, a "following" of custom and technique, was also a retracing of trails and tracks that had been known from time immemorial. The life of a person is the sum of his tracks, the total inscription of his movements, something that can be traced out along the ground.

And the life course of a people, the totality of their ways, conventions, and conventionally encountered situations, is the sum of its "tracks," the trails over its country along which experience is measured out.

It is in this sense that the analogic capabilities of the "track" iconograph render it the perfect "shifter," or hinge element, between the microcosm of restricted, value-coding sensory range, and the *realization* of that microcosm in the larger world of contrastingly fuller sensory range. For a track represents itself as microcosm, as being and movement compressed onto a two-dimensional plane, and it thereby implies the fuller embodiment of this being and movement, as that which made the track. To "follow" the track is to infuse a microcosm with the existence and motion of its maker, and, by a certain analogy, any sensory enrichment of its iconography constitutes a similar reversal of the process of abstraction. To perform these operations upon the collective, summative sense of "track," as the

8. *Ibid.*, 131.

total lifeway and experience of a people, is to realize and vivify the making of that track as a creative act.

The Walbiri, according to Munn,⁹ call tracks in the sense of marks left by ancestral beings in the country *guruwari*, a term that may also be used in the abstract sense of ancestral powers embodied in the country. Like the *churinga* of the Arunta, artifacts of the creative times that contain the spirits of the creative beings,¹⁰ *guruwari* can be used to ritually replicate or reconstitute those times. It is significant for our interest that the ritual reconstruction invariably involves a "following" of the track in some form. Or other, and usually a sensory enrichment of the *guruwari* as design—in the visitation of secret sites that contain such designs, or the preparation of a ground painting called a "dreaming,"¹¹ or through the broadening of the sound spectrum as song. Thus a constructive or creative act performed upon the *guruwari*, the sensory enrichment provided by the Walbiri themselves, takes on the sacramental sense of a communion with, or a realization of *djugurba*, the creative or "story" times ("dreamtime").

Rather than regarding such ritual syntheses or constructions as a "reversal" of the actions of creative beings, moving back from the artifact to the actions that made it, Walbiri thought regards the sensory realization of *djugurba* as following upon the precedent of the original creative acts, themselves a form of premeditated construction:

Men gave the standard explanation that in ancestral times ancestors dreamed their songs and designs while sleeping in camp. As one informant put it: 'he dreamt his track.' On getting up, the ancestor 'put' (*yira-ni*) his designs (that is, he painted them or otherwise gave them material form) and sang his songs. As he traveled along,

9. *Ibid.*, 119.

10. Baldwin Spencer and F.J. Gillen, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), 123.

11. Geoff Barton, *Aboriginal Art of the Western Desert* (Adelaide: Rigby Limited, 1979), 146.

he sang his journey . . . he sang of his journey, the events along the way.¹²

Thus the synthesis of *djugurba* is not simply the mystification of human constitutive acts (as, for instance, in a "scientific" reconstruction), but the assumption of a creativity intrinsic to the action of the creative times.

If we reflect upon the fact that the only knowledge or experience that Walbiri have, or can have, of the creative phase of the world, *djugurba*, comes about in one way or another through the human realization of microcosmic symbols expanded into myths, songs, designs, and "country," it becomes apparent that Walbiri religious life is constituted in this way. Munn comments:

Songs are in a sense symbols or oral language, and ancestral design are symbols of visual or graphic 'language.' The ancestors are in effect 'talking about' the things that happen to them in both visual-graphic and verbal ways, and such 'talking' objectivates the world around them, giving it social, communicable reality.¹³

Although it is clearly elucidated by their marvelously direct, recursive usages and epistemology, the dialectic between microcosmic codings and sensorily rich aesthetic productions is by no means limited to the Walbiri, or to central desert aborigines. It is, rather, the condition of human symbolism; a polarity or contrast opposing an artificially restricted symbolic coding to an (equally) artificially expanded iconic imagery. For the act of sensual and qualitative restriction necessary to the constitution of referential value both implies and renders possible a reflexive sensual and qualitative expansion; neither is more primary or more "natural" than the other, for both are effects of the same scission, and each realizes its character in contrast to the other.

Neither sensual restriction nor the sense of referential value

12. Munn, *Walbiri Iconography*, 146.

13. *Ibid.*, 149.

that it facilitates is equivalent, of course, to meaning, though the perception that we understand as "meaning" would be inconceivable and inexpressible without symbolic reference. Meaning requires a forged absolute, as a kind of epistemological "lie," in order to frame such truths as it is able to convey. By the same token perception is by no means equivalent to the aesthetic productions through which the expansion of sensory range is realized, yet is bound to them, and schooled by them, as its focus. To speak of perception without this focus is like speaking of meaning without the orienting axes of symbolic reference. It follows from this that there is a development of perceptual or analogic focus coincident with every symbolic regime.

Instead of Saussure's "absolute" unit of sensual abstraction, the sign, as a mediator between "natural" percept and the abstract coding of reference, I have suggested that a modulation of (relative) sensory amplitude—restriction as against expansion—embodies and enacts the mediation between referential coding and perceptual image. Referential symbolism occupies one pole—that of coding through sensory restriction—of the mediation, and perceptual image or analogy—self-significative symbolism—occupies the other. Neither is more "natural" or "cultural," more or less "artificial," than the other, and although the dialectic as a whole can be seen as a mediative process, the elements that it mediates are not those of nature and culture.

The mediative significance of the dialectic is best understood by considering each of its poles as a point of mediation between the other and an element external to the dialectic (fig. 2). The mediation is in fact dual and recursive, negotiating the "external" polarity mediated by the dialectic within the dialectic itself. (The dialectic, in other words, is itself a representational microcosm in relation to an "external" macrocosm.) Symbolic codings or points of reference thus mediate between the (external) social collectivity and perceptual image, simultaneously providing a sensory medium for the coding of referential "invariance" and conventional reference points for the orientation and recognition of images. Perceptual images, or analogies, mediate between the individivative, factual world and symbolic reference, incidentalizing the referential as self-signification,

and referencing the incidental as perception through a symbolic value space.

The dialectic, then, mediates between two ideal and effectively unrealizable points, the social collectivity and concrete, individivative fact or event. No symbol ever attains complete or absolute conventionality, any more than a trope or image is ever absolutely unique. The cultural dialectic of figure 2 demarcates a range within which symbolic expressions, images, and reference points innovate upon one another as *relatively* collectivizing or differentiating. The dialectic is *enabled* by an encompassing principle of figure-ground reversal, such that

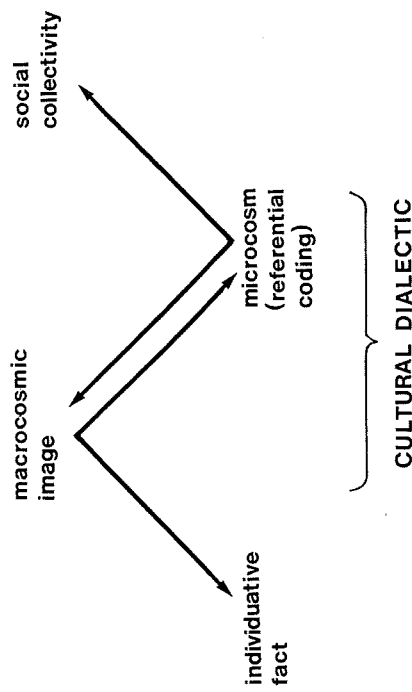


FIGURE 2: Macrocosm and microcosm as mediative foci.

each pole of the dialectic is the limiting condition of the other. An image, such as the crucified Christ in Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, can be identified as a "symbol," and attain a certain measure of conventionality, whereas a symbolic point of reference can be seen as "back metaphor"—the "as if" of conventional usage viewed against the "is" of a metaphor formed against that usage. A symbol that stands for itself, in other words, can also stand for something else; a referential symbol can be seen to stand for itself.

Thus the cultural dialectic, the range within which the general and the particular become accessible to, and expressible

Polys.
Rivers

by, human beings, can, like naming, be analyzed in two different ways. It can be seen in microcosmic terms, as a semiotic of names contrasting with names, points of reference that stand for symbols, others that stand for their referents (or even their *reference*), and still others that guarantee, like Saussure's "sign," the fact of abstraction itself. The result is a science of signs. Approached from the standpoint of image rather than point, the other alternative, however, the dialectic becomes a macrocosmic realm of embodied meanings, symbols that stand for themselves. Such an analysis becomes, subject to the limitations inherent in image, a study of meaning. It is a "science" to the degree that one is willing to put by predictability and the point-precision of reference for the self-evidence of meanings that are, to paraphrase an observation of Felix Mendelssohn's, "too definite for words."

If macrocosmic forms may be distinguished from the microcosm through their self-signification and broadened sensory range, they may be contrasted with (unmediated) "physical" perception by the fact that they have significance. The significance is of course highly particularized and bound up with the percepts themselves, rather than determined by a coding of abstract values. But is no less significant for all of that, and it is certainly not the kind of simple, "natural," or primitive significance from which australopithecines or canny high priests once derived language by a novel act of abstraction. And precisely because macrocosmic image is neither primitive nor derivative, we can conclude that forms such as graphic art, poetry, music, and ritual are not either—they must be as old, as basic, and as important as language, for they are part of the same condition.

The conflation of aesthetic and "everyday" images implied in this notion of significant perception may well seem peculiar or even erroneous in view of our tendency to consider perception a natural, and art an artificial, act. The discrimination and recognition involved in our ordinary apprehension—seeing, hearing, touching, and the general faculty that integrates these "senses"—of the world around us are cultural and symbolic activities. They are, at a very general level, every bit as cultural, and as natural, as Mozart's composition of *The Marriage of Fi-*

garo, or as my listening to it. The realization that this is so does not render art mundane and ordinary any more than it transforms laundry lists into poetry, though it may be helpful in understanding how art can be powerful and laundry lists less so. Aesthetic images have the same symbolic valence as those of ordinary, significant perception: they belong to the dimension of self-signification. In the words of Victor Zuckerkandl:

What tones mean musically is completely one with them, can only be represented through them. Except in the case of creative language . . . and of poetic language, where other, more 'musical' relations come into play, language always has a finished world of things before it, to which it assigns words; whereas tones must themselves create what they mean.¹⁴

The difference between ordinary perception and artistic creativity is not that between a naturalistic "sensing" of the world and an artificial, meaningful "interpretation" of that sensing, but rather it is a difference between one kind of meaningful act and another one, of greater concentration, organization, and force, within the same semiotic focus. The power of a great music, of a compelling tradition in poetry or painting, is the power of concentrating and preempting, organizing, orchestrating, and distilling, the significance that serves us in our ordinary apprehension of reality. Art is the burning glass of the sun of meaning. If this were not so, if the transcendental realizations of art were not at the same time transcendental realizations of reality, it would scarcely be necessary to disqualify aesthetic construction as mere artifice or illusion.

The point is better made by reference to the historical phenomenon of iconoclasm as it appeared in Byzantium, in Islamic culture, and among the followers of Savonarola and the English Puritans. Each of these movements was "fundamentalist" in the sense that it was committed to the status of Holy Scripture as the actual *logos*, or Word, of God or Allah. It followed from

14. Victor Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol: Music and the External World*, trans. W. R. Trask, Bollingen Series XLIV (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 67.

this commitment, made emphatic often to the point of protest, that the expansion of symbolic significance into macrocosmic realization became automatic, as it were, a preempting of divine creation. Macrocosmic symbolization, in a graphically representational form, and often in other forms, such as drama, as well, was interdicted because the cultural dialectic itself had been sacralized. Where word is holy reality, its expansion is divine creation.

Another historical example, that of the French impressionists, shows that the macrocosmic nature of art can be a secular discovery as well. There is a "raising of consciousness" regarding the relationship of painting to visual "reality" that is discernible in the development of Western painting. It commenced with the invention of a "world space," continued through the awakening self-consciousness of artists who discovered brushstroke and the art of concealing art, to the crisis of "how to paint" among the artists of France and the Low Countries in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The issue was no longer, as it had been for previous centuries, the evocation of a sacred or secular world space, because the macrocosmic function of painting had been determined. The artist was in command of perception, because perception itself was something like painting; it was no longer necessary to "represent" the truer reality of the senses, but only to determine how to paint, how to use the senses to create reality. From here to the claim of the cubists, that their delineation of figures in cubical form portrayed the true reality, was but a step.

Whether it deals in cubical "realities," modulated tones, or the verbally elicited conceits of Shakespeare, art shares the qualitative (what neurophysiologists call the "spatial") symbology of perceptual experience. As a symbology the macrocosm is impervious to systemization, for the simple reason that it is already the kind of figuration that systematizing portends; to organize a percept into a system would involve a transformation or metamorphoses, and since transformation or metamorphosis is simply the means by which qualitative forms undergo change, one would merely exchange one percept for another. The problem is essentially the same as that of glossing

a metaphor: the terms of the metaphor are themselves the gloss. One can, of course, discuss sensibly the implications that metaphor has for the verbal, and this is largely what our literature on metaphor involves. One can, similarly, discuss sensibly the implications of macrocosmic construction in general for cultural relations, and this is what the present study is all about.

Dealing with primitive elements that are themselves configurations, our problem is very much the opposite of the semiotist or structuralist, who seeks to determine the manifold systematics by which elemental units are combined so as to construct complexity. Appropriate transformation ("how to paint"), rather than accurate reconstruction (or deconstruction) is my goal. Like Goethe, who sought in his theories of color and plant metamorphosis to establish a natural science based on the objectivity of self-evident forms and meanings, we need to find the generic—in this case, that of cultural transformation—amid a welter of forms. Such a generic need not be a determinant, or a picture, or a structure, of "culture," but rather what we could call an image of our own "interpretation," and hence of meaning.

A single metaphor, regardless of its scope, invariably presents the enigma of what Freud called "condensation"¹⁵—a richness of potentially elicited analogies, all at once, that makes the "reading" of the expression, or the fixing of its intent, a matter of the interpreter's own selection. If we allow Julesz's analogy of "cyclopean" perception, then the "stereoscopic image" projected in a metaphor wants a conventional focal point. This is an intrinsic property of embodied meaning, which is always its own focal point, a point that only in some cases—the limiting cases where macrocosmic image approximates to the microcosm—become conventional. And if we should choose to argue, as I have here, that the indicative of conventional reference, as "ultimate subjunctive," is itself a certain strain of metaphor or trope, then the problem of condensed meanings involves the conventional also.

15. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953).

The problem of "reading" elicited analogic flow can be countered to some extent by contextualization, using the pattern or tendency of other associated tropes as guides in the interpolative interpretation of a particular example. (Convention is perhaps, in this respect, social contextualization.) If we approach a set of cultural analogies, a ritual, for instance, as a contextual set in this way, then the understanding and explanation of its individual metaphors may be illuminated by the strain or tendency of the whole; a general sense of the whole will inform the interpretation of its parts, and vice versa.

But if we can construct the ritual as a whole as a trope, then the contextual interrelationships among its components—its constituent tropes—will be relations of parts of a trope to the whole, and we will have parsed the trope. The force of the generic lies not in some "family resemblance" among the constituent images of a ritual, but in the holography of part and whole—the closure of the constituents to form a trope or metaphor in a larger frame of cultural significance. The whole is, in fact, the condensation, via the order of the generic, of the constituents, and condensation becomes, in this way, the order of cultural construction.

Returning now to my point of departure, the contrast between name as reference and name as analogic relation, it is clear that the dialectic of macrocosm and microcosm, as an analytic strategy, amounts to an encompassing of the entire symbolic continuum within the realm of analogic relations. Having discarded the Saussurian notion of "sign" as the frontier of abstraction (and, therefore, of symbolism), symbolic points of reference must themselves be treated as analogic constructs—metaphors—although they are in fact the limiting condition of metaphor. This means that the dialectic opposes the collective images of convention (including lexical codings) to the relatively macrocosmic images of whole perception in an interplay of restriction and expansion.

I have shown that name (or, of course, symbol) as "point of reference" has the effect of stopping or controlling the flow of analogy for social purposes. (A previously unnamed Daribi child may be named either *poai*, "named," or *poziawai*, "un-

named," analogically opposite aspects of the same sequence; but for purposes of naming and identification the play of analogy must stop *somewhere*, and so one is chosen.) Symbol as *image*, as the elicitation of multiple, condensed analogy, bridges between names as points of reference, bringing them into a relational field. The transition involved in expanding a metaphor into larger frames of cultural reference is a transformational expansion through a relational field, but it is also controlled by the exigencies of what I have called the "generic," the holography of trope expansion that is the formal concomitant of condensation.

If images and points of reference, macrocosm and microcosm, are indeed mediators, then they must achieve their signification—and their very constitution—in the act of mediation. A point of reference is significant, and significant, insofar as it mediates among points of reference. Thus the movement, or process of expanding point metaphors into frame metaphors, which I have called *obviation*,¹⁶ embodies a movement back and forth across the dialectic until the mediation is resolved. Obviation may be seen as the dialectical resolution of mediation, the exhaustion of a mediator, and of the relations set up through it, as the mediation condenses into one of its poles. The obviation of image, at the macrocosmic pole, resolves itself in the formation of a conventional (or moral) metaphor relating the factual and the collective (fig. 3a); the obviation of convention, at the microcosmic pole, resolves itself in the formation of an individuated metaphor relating the factual and the collective (fig. 3b). In each case, mediative interaction within the dialectic (collapsed, in Fig. 3, into a linear movement, but best depicted as ternary opposition) leads to the encompassing of one pole by the other.

The expression that is formed by such a resolution takes over the whole function of the dialectic in mediating between social collective and factual embodiment. But this does not mean that it includes those aspects of actuality within its formal

16. Roy Wagner, *Lethal Speech: Daribi Myth as Symbolic Obviation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), chapter 1.

articulation: it cannot, for they are not symbolic—we know them only through the mediation of cultural reference and cultural image. The following chapter presents an ethnographic example of such a mediated dialectic, an obviation sequence. The recursiveness of the dialectic itself, and the external poles of social collectivity and embodied fact that it mediates, are constituted by exponential orders, or powers, of trope. I shall

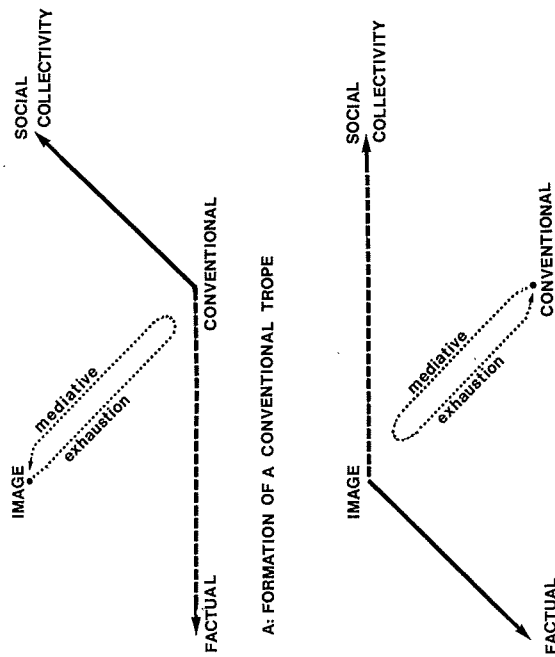


FIGURE 3: Obviation as mediative resolution.

conclude this discussion of the dialectic by introducing the first and most immediately relevant of these, second-order trope.

The reversibility inherent in obviation—that the expansion from point to frame can move from microcosm to macrocosm or from macrocosm to microcosm—amounts to its enabling condition, the character of dialectic itself. This can be understood in terms of the notion of “back metaphor,” noted above: that when the “as if” implied by a metaphor is established (as

in “is”), the “is” of the conventional references becomes itself a metaphorical “as if.” This reversibility amounts to superordinate principle, the second-order trope of figure-ground reversal, by which a perception can be inverted with its perceptual “ground.” Hence the dialectic is enabled by its reversibility, by the fact that—albeit differentially and in different ways—referential microcosm and embodied macrocosm can serve alternately as figure and ground to one another.

Just as trope in our ordinary understanding amounts to a perception within a field of conventional reference, so figure-ground reversal is the *trope of perception*. It applies the principle of trope to trope itself, changing its orientation, and thus both enabling and bounding the scope of obviation.